

Isaiah 1:1-7

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[0 : 00] In the middle of 2008, my current passport expires.

In three weeks' time, however, my wife and I are to visit one of our daughters, her husband and their little family in Houston, Texas. Then, while we're in the United States, we're joining my younger brother and his wife on a cruise to the Caribbean.

Sunny, warm, relaxing. Not that I want to make you jealous, of course, in the middle of a dark, cold winter.

However, the point is that by the time we leave the United States, at the very end of our holiday in January, the end of January, there will be just less than six months before my passport expires.

And the rules say that if you're going to a foreign country, your passport must be valid for at least six months beyond the date that you plan to return home.

[1 : 39] And so, just a few days ago, I had to apply for a new passport. That meant, of course, I had to have a new set of current photographs taken.

Now, if you are about, and I know someone here is about to get, a new passport for whatever reason, I need to let you know that the rules for your photograph have been tightened up.

You get very specific instructions, and one of these is that unless it's absolutely necessary, spectacles, glasses, should not be worn when your photograph is being taken.

Why? Well, it seems that the flash can reflect from your spectacles, and then that can hide your eyes, and that can make you hard to identify accurately.

Now, I go to the United States quite a lot, and naturally since 9-11, and since the disaster of the Twin Towers in New York, the American authorities have tightened up security, especially at airports where foreign nationals enter the country.

[3 : 00] Of course, you need a passport. And the appropriate visa or waiver. But then as you go through passport control, you get both fingerprinted and the iris of your eye photographed.

You see, the question of your unique individual identity is very important. Or take another kind of modern example.

Here is my bank card. My bank card that enables me to take money out of my bank book or bank account, if there's money in it, either in a bank or from one of the thousands of holes in the wall that are all over the place.

And this can be in now almost any country in the world, or indeed at most supermarkets, when the question is asked, do you want cash back?

I often felt that was a rather silly question to ask. It's an inviting question, until you realize it's cash back from your bank and not from the supermarket.

[4 : 30] Ah, but there's a catch. You see, this little card in itself is never enough. Even although it's got my bank account number, it's got my name, and it's got my branch code identity on it.

You see, they're all here, and they're all mine. But to confirm my identity, I need my personal, individual pin number.

And I must be careful never to let that pin number slip into someone else's hands. because there would be the danger then of my unique identity being stolen.

That was the real problem in the recent fiasco in the Child Benefit Office at Her Majesty's Records Office in Newcastle, where the personal identity of 25 million people were lost in transit.

making 25 million people absolutely vulnerable to identity theft and then to fraud. You see, personal identity, who we are, is a vital issue.

[6 : 02] It is, to my mind, one of the great proofs of a living God that there are no two people in normal circumstances exactly the same.

That's one of the glories of creation. That as billions of people have been born onto this earth and still are, no two of them are exactly the same.

Oh yes, there are family resemblances. There are common blood groups. there is similar skin tone. But there are those identity marks that separate each one of us.

We who believe in God have, of course, always known this, that we are individually and wonderfully and preciously woven in our mother's womb.

But now science confirms it. For many years, the litmus test was our fingerprint, which is utterly unique to me and to you.

[7 : 14] Yes, in the purposes of God, my identity is not just important, it is unique. But now, of course, there is our DNA, a complex web of cells knit together and mine is unique and yours is unique to you.

For two thousand years, people all over the world have turned at this time each year towards Bethlehem.

And they have focused their hearts upon a child. A child like you, a child like me, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones, with his own familial likeness, no doubt, with his own unique fingerprint and DNA, with his own unique identity, even more so.

But who is he? What is the child's identity? Well, as I said this morning, this is a child with a very particular heritage.

For hundreds of years, there were those in the Middle East expecting a very special person to come. The one they called the Messiah.

[8 : 49] The one the Greeks called the Christ, the Anointed One. And of course, while they'd never been fully given, as it were, the unique photofit identity of the Christ, they had been given very strong hints that would help them when the time came to identify him.

And nowhere are these hints stronger than in the passage we read in the book of the prophet Isaiah in chapter nine. one. This is a passage that is being read all over the world and indeed sung all over the world as we prepare to celebrate the child's birth.

But what does it say? What does it mean? The child's identity. The reading of this passage in people's Christian liturgy usually begins at verse two of chapter nine.

And in a sense, that's because verse one really belongs more closely, ties with the last few verses of chapter eight, which reminds us that useful as they undoubtedly often are, our chapter and our verse division of the scriptures is in some ways often arbitrary and certainly no part of what we might call the authorized spirit inspired canon of holy scripture.

And so bearing that in mind, I want to address here the child's identity. Who is this child? Who is this son who has been given to the world such that some two thousand years later, after his birth, there are billions in our world who will in some way celebrate that birth during these weeks.

[10 : 59] The child's identity, I want to focus on three simple words as we learn together from this passage. And I pray as we hear the spirit of God deal with our hearts and lives and point us to this child.

And the first of these three words is the word change. Change. As you well know, there was a time in the dealings of God with his people when freed from the slavery of Egypt, the twelve sons of Jacob or Israel were allocated their own area of Palestine in which to rear their families and to make their living.

And the two tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were given land in the north area of the country, what still we might call Galilee.

Now it's an understatement to say that these have been hard times for these tribes as well as some of the other tribes. It was a time of being suppressed and being controlled by the powerful, all-conquering king of Assyria.

So much so that Isaiah says of them in chapter 8 and verse 22, Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

[12 : 44] But the reality was then, still is, and ever shall be, the Lord God does not desert his beleaguered people.

And we do well to remember this in our day and in our generation in Scotland. world, as we see our Saviour's birth swallowed up in a swill of cash, of spending and of booze, as we see our church in the land seemingly shrinking into greater and greater insignificance, almost by the day, maybe even as you look at your own life and you wonder in the darkness where the Lord is in all of this.

Like St. Paul, we must remember, persecuted we may be, but we are not forsaken. Sorrowful we may be, but we are always rejoicing.

Well, for the people of Galilee, change is on its way. There will be no more gloom, for those who were in distress.

It could very well be a place of deep darkness now, but the light of the world is coming to Galilee, the way of the sea, and along the Jordan will have its day of honour.

[14 : 17] The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, and those living in the land of the shadow of death. A light has dawned.

Change is on the way. Hope is on the horizon. God is still in charge. And of course, the heart and the power for change is the child.

This child with a very unique identity. His nature is light that will dispel darkness. darkness. As we read this morning in John's Gospel, speaking of the child, the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it, or as another translation puts it, the darkness has not overcome it.

You see, the very nature of the child, and indeed its purpose, is to bring change. Yes, in individual lives, but also in communities, and nations, and societies, to the end that there will be a new heaven, and a new earth.

Of course, there are different things that motivate change in our behavior and hearts. The story is told of someone who received a parrot as a gift.

[15 : 43] The parrot was badly behaved, with a terrible vocabulary. Every word out of the parrot's mouth was rude and obnoxious and full of profanity.

The new owner tried to change the parrot's attitude by consistently saying only polite words, playing soft music, and anything else he could think of to clean up the parrot's vocabulary.

In the end, the owner lost his temper, and he yelled at the parrot. parrot. The parrot yelled back. He shook the parrot, and the parrot just got even angrier, and even ruder.

So, in desperation, the owner grabbed the parrot, the bird, and put it in the freezer. For a few moments, the parrot squawked and screamed.

Then, suddenly, there was total quiet. not a peep was heard for a whole minute. The owner was scared, scared he'd hurt the bird, and so he quickly opened the freezer door.

[17 : 01] The parrot calmly stepped out into his outstretched arms and said, I believe I may have offended you with my bad language and rude behavior.

I'm sincerely remorseful for my inappropriate transgressions, and I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my rude and unforgivable behavior.

The owner, as you may understand, was stunned at the quick change in the bird's attitude. He was just on the point of asking the parrot what had made such a dramatic change in his behavior when the bird said, may I ask what the turkey did?

Yes, there can be different motives that change our behavior, but the change in Israel was to come about by the grace of God, through the gift of a child.

The world the Israel would yet see growth, the nation an influx of real joy. But more than this, the day was coming when the burdens that lay on them as victims, victimized, shattered, enslaved people, these burdens would be burst asunder, and they were heading for freedom.

[18 : 38] freedom. Yes, my friends, the child's identity is about change, the kind of change that comes from light shattering darkness, growth replacing terror, joy flooding out sorrow, yokes and burdens destroyed, and all bloody memories of the defeats of war lying in burning cinders.

Change comes through this child's identity. And so to the second of these three words, and it's quite simply the word child, child.

What is going to bring this change, this oh so dramatic change about? Yes, it's a child. It's a very unique child.

For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. Of course, there are those, yes, even so-called believers, who would dispute that these words directly refer to the child of Bethlehem.

those who just cannot bring themselves to acknowledge that what was written 700 years before the baby's birth could ever be meant to speak of this child whose birthday soon the world celebrates.

[20 : 17] But you know, some of these same people have no qualms about taking seriously things like horoscopes or new age remedies.

But this is a child with a very special identity. The government will be upon his shoulder. No wonder when news came of his birth in Bethlehem that Herod feared for his kingdom.

Poor Herod had more insight sometimes than many commentators give him credit for. This was to be part of the child's identity. He was to be a king.

Indeed later, he would be crowned king of kings and lord of lords. But then Isaiah takes us on, as it were, a catalogue of names that reflect the characteristics of the royal child.

The names which consist of two elements each were not usual names given in the Old Testament to human children. Wonderful counselor.

[21 : 31] One in whose presence people will be in awe. A colloquial American translation might be awesome counselor. One who is full of gentle wisdom.

One who, like the good counselor, will listen, will show compassion, and give true advice. and how badly we need this child with these gifts in our world today.

A world, it seems, heading towards the furnace of global destruction, with millions drowning in rising coastal waters, while millions more drown their souls in the surging sea of Christmas indifference and squalid pleasure.

No wonder we cry, O Lord, come afresh, wonderful counselor, that the world may marvel at your wisdom.

Awesome child, wonderful counselor, mighty God, here we find the divine origins, and the divine nature of the child affirmed.

[22 : 51] You know, this has been a huge sticking point for many down through the ages. For claiming to be, just who Isaiah said he would be, God in human flesh, Jesus was crucified as a heretical criminal.

the early church took hundreds of years to declare unashamedly and unequivocally at one of its councils that Jesus was fully God, fully divine, but also fully man, fully human.

Today there are thousands in our churches who simply will not assent their devotion to a child claiming to be divine. And yet this is the heart of our faith.

This child was and is no ordinary baby, born of a virgin, worshipped by angels and shepherds and wise men alike, who lived a spotless, sinless life, who died a volunteer's death for us, but who left an empty grave and who sits at the right hand of God the Father.

Father, it is a pretty awesome truth, isn't it? Everlasting Father, one who shares with his Father God his eternal power, one who provides compassionately, one who protects totally, and Prince of Peace, the one who will bring shalom, that wholeness of peace and well-being to individuals and to nations, not to say to creation itself.

[24 : 50] We have no time to expound these fantastic words, but just listen to them once more, and let them flood your beating heart and fill your tired mind.

Of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness.

from that time on and forever. There's an old hymn that begins, man of sorrow's wondrous name, hallelujah, what a savior.

The child's identity, here he is, Jesus, savior, one to be utterly trusted, utterly believed, and utterly worshipped.

the child. And that brings me briefly to the third of these words, and it's the word challenge, challenge.

[26 : 10] were there those then, as now, who were already asking the question, this is the stuff that fairy tales are made of, they say.

This is so surreal, it's impossible, it's unbelievable, they say. How on earth can this happen? well, the answer then, was this, the zeal of the Lord of hosts, the Lord Almighty, will accomplish this.

The answer in Bethlehem, as Mary and Joseph waited, was, the zeal of the Lord Almighty, will accomplish this.

the answer in our day and generation, to all who question God's miracle child, is this, the zeal of the Lord Almighty, will accomplish this.

Here, in these words of Isaiah, we see the amazing grace of God, at full power. You see, the child's identity, is not dependent on his different names, but on his divine family.

[27 : 34] That he is, from all eternity, united in the Trinitarian love of his Father and the Holy Spirit. And what is impossible with us, is entirely possible with God.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty, will accomplish this. That's our challenge. my friends, this Christmas season. To believe that the godless mess we see can be changed.

That's our challenge, my friends, as we seek to bring people to Jesus, and seem so often to fail, that the Lord can do it.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Our challenge is a challenge in the child's identity. Yes, we are, each of us, unique.

An amazing, incontrovertible truth, made in the image of God, yet in our ways different. But when we look for the child's identity, we meet one whose DNA, as it were, is identical with his father and the gracious Holy Spirit.

[28 : 59] And because of who he is, unique, Jesus, savior of the world, he changes us, this child, and he challenges us to follow him and change the world.

Be not afraid, be not cautious, be not ashamed. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Amen.